

EXTRACT FROM “WATER, SHOULDERS, INTO THE BLACK PACIFIC”

Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley

Every day is Ladies’ Day at Richmond.

We love them and can’t do without them. Now they do a big part of the job. Who are they? Our women.

—Headline from *Fore ’N’ Aft*, Kaiser Shipyards Safety Magazine,
June 2, 1944

There are many Negroes in the Richmond shipyards, and it would be hard to find more ardent workmen anywhere. For these men and women are filled with a spiritual fervor in this war . . . the sort of fervor that makes them sing as they work a ship’s gun in rhythmic unison, or shout “Freedom!” as a ship goes down the ways.

—*Fore ’N’ Aft*, May 1943

three: pearls

you, you walking past me on macdonald avenue with the slender fingers & unpromising thighs & undaunted glints at hand or chest or wrist, you, if you’re here working in the shipyards this wartime, you must want a lot. you don’t have to tell me, we all do. you want so much, your want is like the color purple in the night sky or wind forcing its way through a closed window or a dancer spinning a hundred pirouettes, breathcutting & imperious. you want something impossibly possible only here, the wine colored cowboy boots you dreamed of in arkansas or the diamond ring bright as your glass doorknobs in minnesota, the bags of groceries you

can't wait until you're out of your work soot to buy or the women who charge crisp paychecks to lay in the night bellies of boats, the curve of a brown boy's smile or the escape route from your airless house. the first ship launch i saw in richmond was the *ss george washington carver victory*, presided over by miss lena horne herself, & thousands of brown bodies ferried & trained & drove & walked from all over the bay to crowd the yard & watch her launch. when the ship slid into the may water a bright hatted, molasses brown woman ran forward like an ibis before a hurricane, her arms spread wide & her voice raised to the *carver* & the sky, she yelled, *freedom! freedom!* they wrote about her in the papers & *fore n aft*, the kaiser newsletter, & they praised her & the patriotism of the american negro. but i was there & what i heard wasn't a belief but a desire, like slaves' cries to mississippi river boats they dreamed of escaping on, something bottomless & ripe & older than one war. that cry, that, is what the wanting i feel on the streets of richmond is like, the wanting of boots & jewels & bodies that's wanting for something like freedom big enough to open the skies with a shout.

this saturday morning i'm downtown picking up the dress & hat i'm wearing to my birthday dinner with johnnie, & already all the wanting here is calling pearls of sweat to my hairline. i pass by the richmond café, its window advertising good coffee, quality food & a free war show in block letters, & notice a beautiful brown woman posing for a photograph. she has hair swept up to the skyline & wears a skirt tumbling with tropical flowers, night black stockings over thin calves, a long string of multicolored glass beads knotted between her breasts, & —even though it's july— a fur coat draped queenly over her shoulders. i see the shutter click & think, but, no picture will ever capture why you would want or even need to put so much color & wealth against your skin, & then smile with cheeks round as good luck.

when i open the apartment door johnnie is sitting bent over the *richmond independent*, the newspaper pinned to the kitchen table with her fist. *listen to this, serena, listen to this. there's a colored man riding a bus & he bumps up against a white sailor, of course, because you know how these buses full up. & six white sailors chase him off the bus, corner this one man by himself to beat him, & the independent says it's his fault for stepping on the sailor's toes in the first place!* johnnie always reads out these stories the papers run about negro crime & negro consumption & general negro dirtiness, always furious to make her veins throb, & i'm always touched, a little, by her earnestness in believing that newspapers are a place people tell the truth. in new orleans you know papers never print the truth, not about storms coming or coming elections or coming out balls or anything

much. on spare scraps of paper johnnie writes down stories she thinks ought to be in newspapers & presses them together in an old leather sketch book. her favorite is one about frances albrier, a negro woman welder who threatened to sue the shipyard union when they refused to let her join then showed up in the yard in welder's regalia telling everyone, *well, i just happened to bust my way in!* i guess johnnie wanted to be a welder & other things that much, too, that she would have bust down anything that got in the way of her being who she already was in her mind.

oh, johnnie, you know the reporters for that paper would never forgive a negro for being uppity enough to own a nice pair of shoes to step on a sailor's toes with, i say, crossing to kiss her cheek & set my packages on the table. next door a muffled man's voice booms over us, *boy, give your sister's toy back, now!* & felix, the boy child, whimpers. the walls at harbor gate are white & new & crumbly when you pin a poster up, so thin when you lean on them you wonder if they can hold their own weight & so thin i think you could put a shoulder or a fist through them, never mind a voice. close as we're packed against our neighbors it must be a fire hazard, let alone a gossip hazard, johnnie grumbles every time we hear our neighbors' fights & dinners. (even though this project is supposed to be integrated we coloreds only live by other coloreds, so at least we don't have to know white folks' business.) bending now & draping my arm over her shoulder, i ask, *now baby, it's a beautiful morning, don't you want to read that paper outside? you know caridad is coming to do my hair & i don't want you to see, i want it to be a surprise.* & johnnie turns quickly like a waiting snake to bite my neck & laughs, answering, *well it's your birthday, girl, don't i get to surprise you?*

but it's true, i always loved reading the newspapers in new orleans; i always loved a good story. when i was sixteen the *times picayune* ran a serial called *kitty foyle* & afternoons i'd sit reading at my godmother's kitchen table with the western exposure, my fingers warm like passing over a candle as i held them to the newsprint. pretty kitty foyle was a career girl before i knew what that was, a poor girl who realized she needed *to be a complete woman with all a woman's satisfactions* & made her own way from the middle country to the coast always following her body & heart, falling for an improbable lover, making hard choices always the wrong choices, getting pregnant out of wedlock with a baby she throws away. *i feel lonely as a jew in germany*, kitty says when she's down. sometimes i imagined i was kitty & sometimes i imagined i was her best friend, that we'd share dresses & curl up together to tell secrets & give each other love advice.

that year was the first news of war, too, huge like hurricane warnings but less real. i remember the muddy gray movie theater light as i watched a newsreel

of the evacuation at dunkirk, fire on choppy whitecaps & the british desperately piling out in sail boats & fishing boats & tug boats. & of course i remember the first sunday in december, 1941, when n  n  ne & her niece nettie & i were working with two shirt buttons undone in the kitchen, getting ready for people coming for backyard supper & i was frosting a blood red velvet cake, white icing thick on the cake & my fingers too. we were listening to records, not the radio, so we were surprised when nettie's mother burst in, asking, *haven't you heard the news? japan just bombed pearl harbor! what? what's a pearl harbor, mama?* nettie asked & tantie fanned away the question, *no, girl, it's not a what it's a where, a place in hawai'i & hawai'i belongs to the united states, just like louisiana or those caribbean islands, so japan just bombed the states & that means war!* i never knew america was such a far reaching place, like france when it owned louisiana & haiti & canada; & when i finally learned it sounded like a woman's secret passed through alleys & kitchens, & i was stained red & white, & we were going to war.

happy birthday! caridad throws her arms around me when i open the door, & even though she's on her way to work she smells like rose water & coty face powder & the color pink. since she's working today & i'm not going in & it's my birthday, she suggested she come by my place to do my hair on the way to the yard & i said yes. we go to the kitchen to set up beauty shop, where she opens her bag & takes out mirrors & pins & irons & a book bound with three ribbons. *these are my best styles*, she says, smoothing the cover, *let's open it up & we'll look through & see which one you like, okay?* in the book are newspaper clippings of society girls & movie stars smiling from under elaborate curls but also other pictures, too, pictures of her mother & aunts, of her cousin playing the piano, of picnics at beaches & parks, of her & her sisters dressed in thin lacy dresses their mother had made for them in the philippines with pearls at their neck & hair in high waves. she explains all the pictures to me, who was where & when & why, what kind of fun they had.

& *look*, she says, retrieving a loose photo from the back of the book, *there's one more i want you to see, even though it's not a hairstyle. this is my old sweetheart.* she hands me a picture of a dark oval face, high cheekbones & thundering eyebrows, swirls of hair cropped close to the scalp. *oh, how handsome! what a prince, cari! what's his name? & what happened between you two?* *that*, she says slowly, smiling like a happy cat, *is barbara.* she pauses, waiting for the effect on me. *barbara's a tomboy, which is what we, what filipinos call people like your johnnie, we have a word for it. you see, you didn't think i knew but i always knew, & that's why i wanted to get to know you. that, & your beautiful spanish hair, miss serena.*

what? you have — & what's the word for girls like us, then? real women, caridad smiles wider & holds the mirror up to our faces together, our cheeks curving together at oblique angles. now what do you think, the bouquet upsweep? & you see we have a lot to talk about while i curl.

i don't have a book of my own, like johnnie or caridad, but i make up my own stories too. sometimes i imagine something like a movie where johnnie & i sail out across the pacific to hawai'i & there johnnie lives like a man, becomes a man, & he & i get married & spend a life of nights strolling on the beach with a flower behind my ear. but maybe i only make that story up because i don't have those words for johnnie & me, like caridad does, & if i did i could make up other kinds of stories that would take me other places. i imagine stories about my mother, too, i'm a grown woman i know but i imagine them still. i tell myself maybe she didn't die when i was born, maybe she just wasn't ready for a baby like kitty foyle wasn't & instead of throwing me away she let me be born then moved across the country to start a new life. & maybe her new life will take her here, one day, & i'll meet her in the yards, & she'll recognize me & be ready to know me; & all those years of wanting & not knowing will make sense.

there's a lot you wouldn't know about richmond & the shipyards if somebody didn't tell you, serena, caridad says over the iron's hiss. like did you know right in downtown richmond there's a shop, a wig shop, where men come from oakland & san francisco & everywhere, doctors & lawyers & everything, to buy themselves women's wigs? at first they say it's for their girlfriend, maybe, but everybody who works there knows & likes to help them with accessories & everything. she releases a curl from between her warm fingers to the nape of my neck. & then there's a club in el cerrito just where cutting boulevard hits san pablo, you know, & that club is for men who dress like women. you go there, you know, everybody goes, men & women or women together or whatever, & there are these performers who are such good, beautiful women you can't tell them apart from real women. they have beautiful wigs & diamond & pearl necklaces & gowns & high heels & everything, so many costume changes & you can listen to them sing for hours because they have voices just like angels, they do!

next door something topples loudly over & the boy twin yells *now look what you've done! daddy, daddy!* & the girl cries, *but daddy told you, felix, the doll is mine!* caridad laughs, *my goodness, do you think they're listening to us, too?* her hand brushes upward on my neck, following carefully with a bobby pin, setting another curl in place. *& this is the best, serena, just the best. you know how*

some people go back to the half built ships late at night to drink & party &, well, you know? what the men & women do? well there's a part of yard three where just women go, & you can go to the ships there & meet other women like johnnie or us & do whatever feels good . . . whatever, you know?

i listen to caridad, liking the sound of her voice rising & falling at the secret parts, tutting & sucking in my breath because i know it tickles her to give me surprises like gifts to unwrap & because sharing this like a secret is making us friends. but of course i'm old enough to know about things like this in new orleans, even if i didn't go there like i haven't been here, & i'm not really surprised that all this is in richmond, too, since everything we want follows us here.

these stories about the ships make me think about other things, too, other things you heard about in louisiana. new orleans was a place where even after it was illegal to bring slaves over from other countries they were still sold downriver & auctioned at st. louis & chartres streets, & when i was little the old people remembered stories they heard from their people about what those boats were like when they finally anchored onto the end of the continent. on those river slaveships women all rode together in one part of the belly of the boat & men in another, & then were bathed & dressed & lined up & sold in the market women on one side, men on the other. & my godmother's mémère used to tell about women who, when they dragged them out of the cargo, had braided each other's hair in beautiful patterns & scratched designs on their scalp in glass; & about women who'd loved each other in the boats, & cried on the auction mornings when they were separated & sent messages up & downriver to each other for the rest of their lives. & even though that wasn't my story, even though my people were never slaves in america i never forgot that; because i was just a girl when i heard but i understood those ship memories were about wanting to be beauty & art & human & love when everything around you told you you couldn't be any of those things, but you were, you still were. & now here we were loving in other boats, boats we were building ourselves, & building to send out to another ocean that this country stretched into now, like a sun looking for a place to set; & everything is different, & nothing is, & it's my own time.

when i hear the apartment door open behind my back i'm still in the kitchen, still in my white cotton robe dusted in powder & rouge & only my silver rayon bra & panties underneath. *oh johnnie*, i say, *johnnie you're back so soon, i'm not ready!* i turn & johnnie's walking wolf-slow & copper-shiny toward me, her chest shielded behind a bouquet of twenty one red roses & her head cocked lightly to one side. *oh*

baby you look like a picture, just a picture, birthday girl. sit down, here, sit down, baby, she puts the firelove red roses on the kitchen table & pulls a chair out to the middle of the floor, sit right here & let me give you your birthday present. she strokes my cheek, my neck, my shoulders that shiver through the cotton. johnnie, i—my hair already, i . . . she unties the sash & unrobes my left arm, whispering, no, you sit still, just perfectly still, serena, you don't move til i tell you to & your hair & your beautiful will be just fine, just fine. now, close your eyes, let me surprise you.

the black & silver insides of my eyelids quiver to stay shut while she takes my hand between her thumb & forefinger & slides down to my floating knuckle. *okay, open, birthday girl* she says, & i open my eyes to a gold ring with three perfect pearls curving together in a triangle. *i know shipyard folks like to spend up on diamonds to show they can but you, i knew you'd want something different, something special like you. you like it, don't you, baby?*

yes, oh yes, i love it. johnnie's fingers move to the button holding the rayon to my waist & her lips against my ear insist *don't move, now, remember, you just stay still.* & i want to move, so much, i want that so much & i want just as much not to be able to move, to feel the strain of muscling against the invisible ties johnnie presses me with & to be wrapped tight enough to struggle but never to float free, never, to float closer & closer into her storm & never float free of her hands. & i want this so desperately, moving against not moving, until the blood rushes in my ears & my wanting spirals like a tornado between earth & water & sky & thunder & johnnie presses my newly ringed hands together & i'm gone, violet & spinning & gone. this, this, *this* is what it feels like to be free today, it feels like surrender & melting & choosing what holds you down & lets you up & knowing this is only happening because you want it, you couldn't say it but you want it, you do. i am twenty one years old, today, & this is what it feels like.

four: homefront blues

welcome, everyone, to the monthly meeting of the richmond, california branch of the naacp. an undertone of blue in the white wall behind mrs. starks & mr. brown, picked up by the blue synthetic of the chairs we all sit on facing their welcome & bounced back by the july sky outside, suddenly closes the room in & makes me want to shut my eyes against its brightness. it's the third sunday of the month & i'm sitting as tall as i can at the back of our recreation center at harbor gate, where the naacp founded this chapter a few months ago because so many of us are unhappy with how, even though this warhousing project is supposed to be

integrated, in front where blacks live are only blacks & in back where whites live are only whites. i'm on my blue seat between johnnie & cari & the room is packed, filled to the bluewhite walls with new-dressed shipyard negros and old-time richmond negros and even white folks, too. i know in a minute they'll read out the local & national naacp reports & then mrs. starkes & mr. brown will talk about what we've all crowded in to hear, the resolution they've drafted to take to the richmond housing authority telling how they've reinvented segregation here even though the federal government says they can't. yes, i know the flow of these meetings, i've been here before.

& no, i never, ever thought when i came to california that i'd end my every third sundays in a meeting like this. i just never thought, you understand, that i'd need to. that afternoon i got off the car with johnnie at ocean beach & saw everyone together at playland by the sea i thought this, this bay area was a different world, & here at this sheer-cliffed coast i'd arrived somewhere i could live so *colored only* would be my past, my childhood, & i could be a young woman & an old woman in another way. & even though i know different now & know why i'm here i'm suddenly surprised, like by that mix of blues that must have always been there but i didn't see it before, surprised by a flood of feeling that spills over my clavicle & onto my chest & brown eyes, suddenly. here i am undertowed by sadness, azure, clear-armed sadness at that thing i've traveled across rivers & lakes & countries with, that everyday & every year & every minute needing to prove that i deserve to take up space, too, & that i deserve to be a woman, too. mrs. starkes stands to read the regional report, gracefully, & so no one notices how i fight to stop tears at my throat.

caridad, beautiful caridad has decided i'm her best friend. i've never had anyone choose me like that, so openly, or wear their love for me so very brightly, like floral print on a new summer dress. some shipyard women have started collecting scrap metal to make jewelry to sell & wear, & cari made a set of silver-like bracelets she gave me as a gift. lunchtimes she follows me to whatever beam i sit on, walking with her arm through mine, & leans in close to my ear & laughs & whispers when the singing shipbuilders come by. mostly, though, we tell each other stories about where we're from. she talks in a way that's its own kind of singing about her papa, his years in the philippines, the coastline her mother came from & the birds that chatter there & the people that died there, the officers' head shakings about negro soldiers loving filipinas but what could they do with two dark races side by side?, & her father's decision to go fight there in the first place not because he loved war so much but because, after fighting in cuba, he just didn't want to go back to not

being able to get a cup of coffee at the same louisiana counters where white soldiers were being given free meals.

cuba? i ask, *cuba, really? did you know my family came to new orleans from cuba, actually went from haiti to cuba then louisiana? what's it like, cuba, did he tell you?* & she tells me his favorite memory, the one he made into a story over & over: how men on the ship did their own laundry & hung it to dry on the rails, dangling blue uniforms from all edges; & the morning they pulled into havana harbor, how he watched their one-toned blues blowing against the so many royal, turquoise, green, sky blues of the caribbean sea that that american cloth was just put to shame. at the end of that lunchtime i ask cari would she possibly be interested in coming to the naacp meeting next week? because we'd be talking about the segregation that wasn't supposed to be happening in richmond but, you know, was. yes, she said quickly & smoothing her pants as she stood up, oh yes she definitely wanted to come. she'd been angry enough to spit about the unions not wanting to let negroes in & making us form those colored auxiliaries, huh, & did you know those same unions wouldn't let filipinos in either? what is it they say, tarred with the same brush, or cut from the same cloth, or something?

because this morning johnnie & i woke up missing the mississippi river we took the f-train to berkeley to sit in bright, cotton-thin summer sun by a creek named for strawberries. not at all the same, no, but a small recollection of what johnnie calls homewaters. her mother was a transplant to the big river like i am to the bay; when she left her first husband she swore she'd never again be a farmer's wife, & after she moved to memphis & wore high heels every day & fell in love with the blues & married her next two husbands she never was. but johnnie's father's family is a century of river boat people, firemen who climbed levees & hauled coal & stoked boilers & flexed biceps & talked confidently. for johnnie the river is another country, a nearby, far away ancestors' land where women (who could only be chambermaids) had to stay separate from men, & colored men (the only firemen) had to stay separate from whites (the only deckhands), & ships' fire had to stay separate from riverwater (part of firemen's job). that big water was a country she could never live in but she'd always dream of, when she was a child like here in the shipyards.

but i'm from new orleans, & for me the river is something else again. i remember without anybody telling me how the mississippi built that city, how the sediment it washed from the middle of the continent to the gulf created new land around us from when i was a little girl until when i was a grown woman, how its current was so strong that houses there are built from keelboats they tore

apart at the river's end rather than try to sail them back up; you see, i remember the ground we walk on is river, and the houses we live in are boats. so for me the mississippi is the place that everything americans will tell you is separate, just never was. i know that johnnie is right about her version of the river—but then again, i am too. when we talk about it by strawberry creek she accuses me of being a romantic about the father of waters, & laughingly i accuse her of the very same thing.

my dear serena,

i hope this letter finds you well, & every bit as beautiful as i left you. i really do wish i would hear from you sometimes, but maybe you're shy in letters like you were in person, or maybe yours are always in those planes that go down, i don't know. don't worry, though, i'm not mad about it, i know our marriage was a different kind. now me, you won't be surprised to hear, i'm still here in the middle of the pacific (don't worry, censor, i'm not going to tell her where!). by now most fellows in my unit are pretty well fed up with our situation, not the place so much but these white officers & how they think they can walk all over us, bust us down to private for no reason & keep us from going on leave EVER so we won't get in trouble with white women in CENSORED (which of course i would never do). & since we can't go off base all there is to do at night is go to church or gamble & talk about how we could organize back against those officers.

i agree with all those other fellows about that but i have to tell you something else, too. serena. the truth is, despite all that i'm really, truly happy here. let me see if i can explain to you why. well first, i really wish you could see the ocean here, it is just so beautiful like nothing i ever imagined. the waves are huge & blue & when all that water pulls back it lets you see the coral reefs spreading out & up like statues on the ocean floor. the waves are huge, like i said & the undertow is too, so some fellows think it's a kind of magic but i love the power of it. in the morning i wake up & have these tropical fruits for breakfast, fruits like you can't get anywhere & watch that water rise & fall, & then evenings before dinner i swim there. & i just love the feeling of my muscles against the force of that water, the power of my body meets the power of the pacific, & when i come back out i pick up shells & pieces of dead coral that i save from time to time. so even though i hate that uncle sam brought me here it's like this is the place i'm meant to be in the world, you know? like i was born in new orleans but i was born here, too.

the sun is shining harder into the recreation center & its light washing out the walls as mr. brown stands by mrs. stark's to read out the resolution that they've

drafted to the housing authority. in assigning housing units in such a way to separate negroes from whites, he tells us, the richmond housing authority *is violating the spirit and the letter of the regulations set forth by the federal public housing authority covering racial discrimination and segregation*. this document is something they'll take to the housing authority, to the city council, to state representatives, federal offices, & without fail to all the newspapers in the bay area to print word for word. & then if our demands aren't met, we'll call a rent strike here at harbor gate to make them pay attention to the almighty dollar if not the people's words. *what this means is, there are so many of us who are tired of being put last, right? real change is going to happen, & it'll take us working folks to make it happen.*

serena, from séraphine. when cari asks me where my name comes from i tell her from my many-great grandmother, marie séraphine, the wave-colored quadroon who was born outside daughter to an indigo planter in haiti, died outside woman to an indigo planter in louisiana, & colored our family's fingers blue for generations. when the slave war broke out on her father's plantation marie séraphine's mulâtresse mother smuggled the girl under her skirts to the border & sailed her to cuba, where she lived (doing no one remembers what) until the spanish drove haitians out & she landed in new orleans with an adopted daughter called annaïse. *serena, from séraphine.* louisiana had just become american then & was cut up into newer & newer sections, blocks for creoles & creoles of color & americans (americans of color were slaves) who crossed neighborhood lines to market & love & gamble but not to stay. marie séraphine settled back of town, lakeside & away from the river in faubourg tremé with other haitians who'd come by way of cuba or the carolinas or georgia or jamaica, & a century later my mother & i were born there.

serena, from séraphine. these are the stories i have about the woman i'm named for & in the end they add up to less than cari's one about cuba. the important things, the things that make a person a person, i don't know. did she like the divided city, did it feel familiar or did she hate being kept in a quartered-off space? did she miss haiti, & did she miss her mother's part or her father's or something else again? where did she meet annaïse & why did she bring her to new orleans, & what did people think of the quadroon with the adopted brown daughter? *serena, from séraphine.* here i am in california, like marie séraphine with my own new waters & my own new kind of household with spouses & lovers & friends & my own new colors & old ones too, & am i following in her footsteps or going somewhere she'd turn her back on? & after all those years and living by it & growing it, what did she really think of the color blue, & what do i think of it now?

somehow when i tell caridad about new orleans & my family stories it doesn't feel quite like home, anymore. but neither does this place where i live.

but if johnnie & i are being easy about the mississippi this morning, maybe that's because there are just some things you wouldn't talk about by a creek named for strawberries. in this cotton-dry summer you wouldn't talk about the spring that river became an ocean, the easter north to south flooded rainwater that collected in waves & carried houses & people & trees through the center of towns & took away johnnie's father & i guess mine, too, in another way. i'd been promised to live with papa when i got a little older & he found a new wife, but in 1927 he lost his tailor shop & left new orleans for chicago; so after the flood days when nènène stacked mattresses & family stories to the ceiling to keep me dry i became really her little girl. but johnnie's father never left the river—he drowned there. like all colored men they could round up at gunpoint in that part of the delta he was driven to haul sand bags to the top of levees, & walking under the shoulder weight of sand & rain his feet slipped in mud & he fell the wrong way, into the river, & no one was allowed to go after him or even break step to look. not that that was the river taking him, no, johnnie told me once, that was powerlessness & white men. (johnnie's uncles started calling her that name after her father, john, because she was looking & acting like him more every day after he was gone.) i know because of that building ships has another meaning for her, my johnnie, something beyond *we can do it* or *good work, sister* or *warriors without guns* or any slogan bright colored posters tell us. that every weld is done perfectly to maybe keep a colored man afloat, to maybe keep him from sinking into the pacific or atlantic in someone else's battle for the world.

but there's another part to my being so happy here, serena, let me see if i can put it in a way that will make sense to you. i wrote you before about how we're working alongside natives on this island, how uncle sam hires them to build roads & bridges & everything & pays just in meals even though they're the best workers of anyone. (officers spend so much time keeping us away from whites but they sure don't mind mixing us together with natives). well one of these men, he & i have become particular friends. he calls himself agu, which is short for something else i think, & if a man can be beautiful then i'd say that he's beautiful. did you know natives here are coloreds, or at least something that looks awful like us? agu has skin the color of nutmeg, hair as bushy as mine (if you remember), a jawline that comes down in a perfect slant & dark brown eyes & long lashes & eyebrows the shape of seashells, a mouth curved like a horn & a chest of muscles i wish i could

claim. i'm learning to speak a little of his language & he knows some english, too, & when we're not working he takes me fishing & teaches me to use a spear like him. now we may come from a country of fishermen but you still can't imagine what you can catch that way, & even what you can just catch with your bare hands in these waters. one time when we were out together he found a baby octopus, just a little guy, & he picked him up & was letting him walk all over his legs & hands like a pet & so i asked, hey agu, can i try that too? he handed him over to me & the little octopus latched on & gee, it was the most incredible feeling, those eight curling legs & all those round cups on my arms sucking & releasing, sucking & releasing, just pushing jolts of electricity through me from head to toe. i don't know how else to explain what it feels like to be with him, but somehow it's always like that. now it's true, fellows are being court martialed here for sodomy all the time, but i want you to know i'm not talking about anything like that at all. i'm talking about just me & him, a true blue friendship, & a feeling that if i weren't a married man, you know, maybe i'd want to stay here & live like this, in something beautiful.

mrs. starks & mr. brown have finished presenting their resolution & abruptly as a thunderclap, moving frantically up from our blue seats, flustered chests & red restlessness scale the room like a hard blush. white folks are standing confidently to drone on how they support this plan, as if we asked their permission, & colored church folks are tall on their feet chiming in baritones that this isn't the way to get white richmondites on our side, no, they've been here a long time & know quiet is a better way to make a place for ourselves. & now itching across my shoulder-blades & stomach & swaying me without warning something new is breaking me open, so open, a hot current of blood anger that magnifies everything & *everything* that should be different here but doesn't know how to be.

i'm furious at all of it, the careless blues in the walls & the black & white of the papers & plans & words, i'm furious at everyone for not understanding the joke in all this: that *home* & *safe home* & *real home* have never been anything more than metaphors for something we never had, never will have & that never existed, & if we're fighting for it we have to know we're really fighting for something else in its name. oh yes some men may believe in home, maybe, because they think it's a woman's place closed in by her hands that continues to stay still like a picture while they run through war & work & death & exploration & technicolor imaginations that they've found a new world in whatever part of the pacific atlantic mississippi gulf governments & paychecks send them to or keep them in. but women, we workers supposed to be keeping that homefront that doesn't exist shouldn't we know better than to pretend that there can be anything like

a real home, or another world, or a safe place for us and why do we—do i, does johnnie—why insist on fantasizing otherwise while we're fighting for space in projects that will be smashed to plaster at our feet after the war? why, why does there seem to be a limit like a front door to what we can even imagine, & why don't we want to say that all shades of blue is just where we live?

caridad, next to me, says nothing but puts her hand over mine.

dear paul,

thank you for your latest letter, & for your stories about this ocean you don't even know i live by, too. you really are a very sweet man, & your letters are lovely even if i do think you write them more for yourself than for me. i can say that, & i can say other things, too, because i know i'll never send this or probably any letter. if i did i'd need to explain what happened & i really don't know how to do that, yet. i guess when i married you i thought i wanted things, like a safe home & a good last name, but the more i tried living in those things the more it seemed like eating beignets every night for dinner—empty & sticky & a little sickly. now i'm living in temporary housing & things & loves i'm still looking for names for & this is so much more where i need to be to become me, serena. that june we were just such romantics, you & i, & i still am & want to be but about other stories, ones less predictable, more joyous & confusing than a wedding party. your letters tell me you're still a romantic too, paul, but i do hope you'll be more careful with your friend agu than you were with me. because i'm sure you get along, i'm sure everything you write is true, but under the little language you two have you can't tell how he really feels about americans when they've come run over his island & made people work in their own home for nothing but food; & even though you're creole, aren't you an american to him? just like under my quietness you couldn't tell how i really feel about men, which is not that they did anything to me like americans to agu but just that different people have different landmarks & loves in their lives than yours, dear. whatever happens, though, i really do hope that you'll be happy, husband, that you'll find a way of being in the world that's as beautiful as you hope for; and if that's a place of all men, well take it from me, that won't be such a bad thing at all.